

Opinion **FT Magazine**

Wines from Okanagan, Canada's Napa Valley

The same pioneering spirit is producing some increasingly impressive bottlings

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In October 2017, David Saltman, a successful cleantech entrepreneur who describes himself as “an early Trump refugee”, tore himself away from his beloved surf in La Jolla, California, to settle in the Okanagan Valley, British Columbia, in western Canada.

While the stunning lakeside scenery may have lured him there, this is also where BC's fledgling wine industry is based. Saltman lived in the Napa Valley in the 1970s, during the early days of the wine scene there, and he told me recently that the Okanagan reminds him of that era.

The collaborative and creative spirit that fuelled Napa's pioneers is certainly evident in BC today. While they may seem to be generating new appellations a little faster than world-beating wines, decisions are being made with the full consultation of everyone involved — and the wines are increasingly impressive.

Vancouver restaurant wine lists, once the preserve of imports, now proudly focus on local bottlings that are more varied with every vintage.

The city's leading wine writer, Anthony Gismondi, was rather disillusioned by the stasis of the Okanagan wine scene at the end of the past century, but he describes the growth and improvement

in the past five years as exponential.

“In the last two years it’s been off the charts,” he says. “It’s like a gold rush now, with new, younger people really taking wine seriously. They’re still learning, but they’re way smarter than lots of people I see around the rest of the wine world.”

The Okanagan has also been benefiting from the cash and ambition of relative newcomers who have made fortunes in unrelated fields — again, a bit like Napa.

John Skinner, for example, retired from stockbroking aged 39 and, a few years later, started research that would culminate in converting the site of the largest apricot orchard in the British Commonwealth into Painted Rock vineyards and winery in 2005.

Two years later, Tony Holler, the former CEO and co-founder of vaccine maker ID Biomedical bought Poplar Grove, one of the first wineries on Okanagan’s Naramata Bench and one of BC’s most popular brands. Its Pinot Gris and Cabernet Franc are its flagships.

Both men, who could well afford to be lounging on a yacht or playing golf, spent seven hours the week before last standing behind a table and pouring their wines at what has become an [annual generic tasting in Canada House](#) on Trafalgar Square.

The UK is seen as, potentially, the most receptive market for Canadian wine, trade with the US being chronically difficult, and pricing being, shall we say, non-aligned. Skinner was told by his California distributor that his Painted Rock wines, some of the most respected in BC, were too cheap for US wine buyers to take them seriously.

Presumably, the difference in land costs has encouraged prospectors from the Oregon and California wine communities to investigate the Okanagan. But the soils may also play a part, with the valley’s slate and clay particularly appealing to those planning to plant fashionable Pinot Noir.

The most impressive BC Pinot Noir I tasted last month was Mission Hill’s 2017 Reserve, which retails in Canada at CA\$27.99, well under £20.

The London tasting may be designed to represent one nation, but outsiders marvel at the apparently impenetrable wall that separates the major wine-producing provinces of BC and Ontario. Admittedly, Canada’s provincial liquor-monopolies system doesn’t help, but it can be near-impossible to find wines from one of them in the other.

Of the two provinces, Ontario is the more obvious “beneficiary” of climate change. The ice wine made from frozen grapes, which used to be Canada’s most famous wine export, most of it from Ontario, is now made in much smaller quantities and considered a slight embarrassment. These days, producers tend to be much more interested in wine made from fully ripened grapes.

Ripeness has long been much easier to achieve in BC, where the southern parts of the Okanagan are semi-desert. However, the Okanagan is long and narrow: it is almost 200km from the border to the northernmost area, where the dominant wine producer, Mission Hill, has been investing.

The side of the lake dictates whether the vines get morning or evening sun, and the extent to which frost can be a threat. Those in the north are described as being like Tasmania, Australia's coolest wine region.

Okanagan vineyards grow a particularly wide range of grape varieties, with Cabernet Franc now more popular than Cabernet Sauvignon because it will ripen reliably before the arrival of the Okanagan's pretty cold winter — despite the cool nights of autumn and even summer. Bordeaux blends are popular and, traditionally, have been priced higher than single varietals, with several top producers advised by Alain Sutre of Ertus Consulting.

Sutre commutes between Bordeaux and Canada but is clearly most excited by the Okanagan. “In Bordeaux, blends are done with a calculator: ‘That assemblage won't make enough wine — let's try adding that tank.’ But in BC I see much more attention being paid than in either France or Ontario.”

Nevertheless, France spells magic in the wine world and Okanagan producers are clearly excited that France's first Master of Wine, Olivier Humbrecht of Zind-Humbrecht, in Alsace, has been persuaded to take on his first consultancy with Phantom Creek, an Okanagan winery owned by a Chinese billionaire. Humbrecht will be concentrating on refining its Riesling and Pinot Gris white wines and instituting biodynamic viticultural practices.

Hundreds of miles from any city, the atmosphere in the Okanagan is particularly pristine and rainfall is so low that most vineyards have to be irrigated. Since the main vine diseases are fungal, encouraged by humidity, organic and biodynamic vine growing is relatively easy.

It is now nine years since I visited the Okanagan, and the enthusiasm of the BC contingent that I saw in London last month left me eager to return. And it's not just wine that is developing: David Saltman's wife Camille is now apparently turning the little town of Kelowna into a tech hub.

RECOMMENDED OKANAGAN WINES

Selfridges, which is owned by Canada's Weston family, has a special offer of Okanagan wines this month and next, with prices per bottle from £18.99, although apparently only Painted Rock wines are on display this month.

- Cedar Creek, Block 5 Chardonnay 2016
- CheckMate, End Game Merlot 2013, Queen Taken Chardonnay 2014, Attack Chardonnay 2015

- Culmina Cabernet Sauvignon 2014, Unicus Grüner Veltliner 2017
- Giant Head, Canyonview Chardonnay 2016
- Mission Hill, Perpetua Chardonnay 2017, Reserve Pinot Noir 2017, Vista's Edge Cabernet Franc 2016, Oculus 2014
- Okanagan Crush Pad, Free Form Cabernet Franc 2017, Free Form Vin Gris 2017
- Osoyoos Larose, Le Grand Vin 2015
- Painted Rock, Red Icon 2016 and 2009, Syrah 2016, Cabernet Franc 2014
- Phantom Creek Pinot Gris 2017, Becker Vineyard Cuvée 2016, Phantom Creek Vineyard Cuvée 2016, Syrah 2016
- Poplar Grove, Legacy 2014 and 2008, Cabernet Franc 2015
- Quail's Gate, Dry Riesling 2018
- Seven Stones Chardonnay 2013
- Le Vieux Pin Sauvignon Blanc 2018, Cuvée Violette Syrah 2016, Cuvée Classique Syrah 2016

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